

HOPALONG CASSIDY'S

magazine

A Brand New Book-Length Novel

BASTARDS OF NEW YORK

Featuring the
Return of the
Famous, Cowboy

**HOPALONG
CASSIDY**



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Hopalong's Hop



Clarence E. Mulford

THE STORY OF THAT BULLY FIGHT WHICH GAVE TO COW-PUNCHER CASSIDY THE NAME
HOPALONG—A STORY OF THE DAYS WHEN THE WEST BRED FIGHTING MEN

HAVING sent Jimmy to the Bar-20 with a message for Buck Peters, their foreman, Bill Cassidy set out for the Crazy M ranch, by the way of Clay Gulch. He was to report on the condition of some cattle that Buck had been offered cheap and he was anxious to get back to the ranch. It was in the early evening when he reached Clay Gulch and rode slowly down the dusty, shack-lined street in search of a hotel. The town and the street were hardly different from other towns and streets that he had seen all over the cow-country, but nevertheless he felt uneasy. The air seemed to be charged with danger, and it caused him to sit even more erect in the saddle and assume his habit of indifferent alertness. The first man he saw confirmed the feeling by staring at him insolently and sneering in a veiled way at the low-hung, tied-down holsters that graced Bill's thighs. The guns proclaimed the gun-man as surely as it would have been proclaimed by a sign, and it appeared that gun-men were not at that time held in high esteem by the citizens of Clay Gulch. Bill was growing fretful and peevish when the man, with a knowing shake of his head, turned away and entered the harness shop. "Trouble's brewin' somewheres around," muttered Bill, as he went on. He had singled out the first of two hotels when another citizen, turning the corner, stopped in his tracks and

looked Bill over with a deliberate scrutiny that left but little to the imagination. He frowned and started away, but Bill spurred forward, determined to make him speak.

"Might I inquire if this is Clay Gulch?" he asked, in tones that made the other wince.

"You might," was the reply. "It is," added the citizen, "an' th' Crazy M lays fifteen mile west." Having complied with the requirements of common politeness the citizen of Clay Gulch turned and walked into the nearest saloon. Bill squatted after him and shook his head in indecision.

"He wasn't guessin', neither. He shore knowed where I wants to go. I reckon Oleason must 'a' said he was expectin' me." He would have been somewhat surprised had he known that Mr. Oleason, foreman of the Crazy M, had said nothing to anyone about the expected visitor, and that no one, not even on the ranch, knew of it. Mr. Oleason was blessed with taciturnity to a remarkable degree; and he had given up expecting to see anyone from Mr. Peters.

AS Bill dismounted in front of the "Victoria" he noticed that two men farther down the street had evidently changed their conversation and were examining him with frank interest and discussing him earnestly. As a matter of fact they

had not changed the subject of their conversation, but had simply fitted him in the place of a certain unknown. Before he had arrived they discussed in the abstract; now they could talk in the concrete. One of them laughed and called softly over his shoulder, whereupon a third man appeared in the door, wiping his lips with the back of a hairy, grimy hand, and focused evil eyes upon the innocent stranger. He granted contemptuously and, turning on his heel, went back to his liquid pleasures. Bill covertly felt of his clothes and stole a glance at his horse, but could see nothing wrong. He hesitated; should he saunter over for information or wait until the matter was brought to his attention? A sound inside the hotel made him choose the latter course, for his stomach threatened to become estranged and it simply howled for food. Pushing open the door he dropped his saddle in a corner and leaned against the bar.

"Have one with me to get acquainted?" he invited. "Then I'll eat, for I'm hungry. An' I'll use one of yore beds tonight, too."

The man behind the bar nodded cheerfully and poured out his drink. As he raised the liquor he noticed Bill's guns and carelessly let the glass return to the bar.

"Sorry, sir," he said coldly. "I'm hait out of grub, the fire's heat, *hawl* the beds are taken. But mebbe 'Awley, down the strine, can ryke care of you."

Bill was looking at him with an expression that said much and he slowly extended his arm and pointed to the untasted liquor.

"Alas finish what you start, English," he said slowly and clearly. "When a man goes to take a drink with me, and suddenly changes his mind, why I gets riled, I don't know what ails this town, an' I don't care; I don't give a cuss about yore grub an' yore beds, but if you don't drink that liquor you poured out to drink, why I'll naturally shove it down yore British throat so cussed hard u'll strain yore neck. Get to it!"

The proprietor glanced apprehensively from the glass to Bill, then onto the businesslike guns and back to the glass, and the liquor disappeared at a gulp. "W'y," he explained, aggrieved, "There hain't no call for to get riled hup like that, stranger. I bloody well forget ha."

"Then don't you go an' 'bloody well' forget this; Th' next time I drops in here for grub an' a bed, you bave 'em both, an' be plumb polite about

it. Do you get me?" he demanded icily.

The proprietor stared at the angry puncher as he gathered up his saddle and rifle and started for the door. He turned to put away the bottle and the sound came near being unfortunate for him. Bill leaped sideways, tawing while in the air and landed on his feet like a cat, his left hand gripping a heavy Colt that covered the short ribs of the frightened proprietor before that worthy could hardly realize the move.

"Oh, all right," growled Bill, appearing to be disappointed. "I reckoned mebbe you was gamblin' on a shore thing. I feels impelled to offer you my sincere apology; you ain't th' kind as would even gamble on a shore thing. You'll see me again," he promised. The sound of his steps on the porch ended in a thud as he leaped to the ground and then he passed the window lending his horse and scowling darkly. The proprietor mopped his head and reached twice for the glass before he found it. "Gawd, what a bloody 'cathen," he grunted. "'E won't be as easy as the lawst was, blime 'im."

Mr. Hawley looked up and frowned, but there was something in the suspicious eyes that searched his face that made him cautious: Bill dropped his load on the floor and spoke sharply. "I want supper an' a bed. You ain't full up, an' you ain't out of grub. So I'm goin' to get 'em both right here. Yes?"

"You shore called th' turn, stranger," replied Mr. Hawley in his Sunday voice. "That's what I'm in business for. An' business is shore dull these days."

HE wondered at the sudden smile that illuminated Bill's face and half guessed it, but he said nothing and went to work. When Bill pushed back from the table he was more at peace with the world and he treated, closely watching his companion. Mr. Hawley drank with a show of pleasure and brought out cigars. He seated himself beside his guest and sighed with relief.

"I'm plumb tired out," he offered. "An' I ain't done much. You look tired, too. Come a long way?"

"Logan," replied Bill. "Do you know where I'm goin'?" An' why?" he asked.

Mr. Hawley looked surprised and almost answered the first part of the question correctly before he thought. "Well," he grinned, "if I could tell where strangers was goin', an' why, I wouldn't

never ask 'em where they come from. An' I'd shore hunt up a li'l game of fero, you bet!"

Bill smiled. "Well, that might be a good idea. But, say, what ails this town, anyhow?"

"What ails it? Hum! Why, lack of money for one thing; scenery, for another; wimmin, for another. Oh, h—! I ain't got time to tell you what ails it. Why?"

"Is there anything th' matter with me?"

"I don't know you well enough for to answer that correct."

"Well, would you turn around an' stare at me, an' seem pained an' hurt? Do I look funny? Has anybody put a sign on my back?"

"You looks all right to me. What's th' matter?"

"Nothin', yet," reflected Bill slowly. "But there will be, mebbe. You was mentionin' fero. Here's a rum you can call: somebody in this wart of a two-by-nothin' town is goin' to run plumb into a big surprise. There'll mebbe be a loud noise an' some smoke where it starts from; an' a li'l round hole where it stops. When th' curious delegation now holdin' forth on th' street slips in here after I'm in bed, an' makes inquiries about me, you can tell 'em that. An' if Mr.—Mr. Victoria drops in casual, tell him I'm cleanin' my guns. Now then, show me where I'm goin' to sleep."

Mr. Hawley very carefully led the way into the hall and turned into a room opposite the bar. "Here she is, stranger," he said, stepping back. But Bill was out in the hall listening. He looked into the room and felt oppressed.

"No, she ain't," he answered, backing his intuition. "She is upstairs, where there is a li'l breeze. By th' Lord," he muttered under his breath. "This is some puzzle." He mounted the stairs shaking his head thoughtfully. "It shore is, it shore is."

WHEN Bill whirled up to the Crazy M bunkhouse and dismounted before the door a puncher was emerging. He started to say something, noticed Bill's guns and went on without a word. Bill turned around and looked after him in amazement. "Well, what th' devil?" he growled. Before he could do anything, had he wished to, Mr. Oleson stepped quickly from the house, nodded and hurried toward the ranch house, motioning for Bill to follow. Entering the house, the foreman of the Crazy M waited impatiently for Bill to get inside, and then hurriedly closed the door.

"They've got onto it some way," he said, his restlessness gone; "but that don't make no difference if you've got th' sand. I'll pay you one hundred an' fifty a month, furnish yore cayuses an' feed you up here. I'm losin' two hundred cows every month an' can't get a trace of th' thieves. Harris, Marshal of Clay Gulch, is stumped, too. He can't move without proof; you can. Th' first man to get is George Thomas, then his brother Art. By that time you'll know how things lay. George Thomas is keepin' out of Harris' way. He killed a man last week over in Tusado an' Harris wants to take him over there. He'll not help you, so don't ask him to." Before Bill could reply or recover from his astonishment Oleson continued and described several men. "Look out for ambushes. It'll be th' hardest game you ever went up ag'in, an' if you ain't got th' sand to go through with it, say so."

Bill shook his head. "I got th' sand to go through with anythin' I starts, but I don't start here. I reckon you got th' wrong man. I come up here to look over a herd for Buck Peters; an' here you go shovin' wages like that at me. When I tells Buck what I've been offered he'll fall dead." He laughed. "Now I knows th' answer to a lot of things."

"Here, here!" he exclaimed as Oleson began to rave. "Don't you go an' get all het up like that. I reckon I can keep my face shut. An' lemme observe in yore hat-like ear that if th' rest of this gang is like th' samples I seen in town, a good gunman would shore be robbin' you to take all that money for th' job. Fifty a month, for two months, would be a-plenty."

Oleson's dismay was fading, and he accepted the situation with a grim smile. "You don't know them fellers," he replied. "They're a bad lot, an' won't stop at nothin'."

"All right. Let's take a look at them cows. I want to get home soon as I can."

Oleson shook his head. "I gave you up, an' when I got a better offer I let 'em go. I'm sorry you had th' ride for nothin', but I couldn't get word to you."

Bill led the way in silence back to the bunk house and mounted his horse. "All right," he nodded. "I shore was late. Well, I'll be gonn'."

"That gun-man is late, too," said Oleson. "Mebby he ain't comin'. You want th' job at my figgers?"

"Nope. I got a better job, though it don't pay so much money. It's steady, an' a hull lot cleaner. So

long," and Bill loped away, closely watched by Shorty Allen from the corral. And after an interval, Shorty mounted and swung out of the other gate of the corral and rode along the bottom of an arroyo until he felt it was safe to follow Bill's trail. When Shorty turned back he was almost to town, and he would not have been pleased had he known that Bill knew of the trailing for the last ten miles. Bill had doubled back and was within a hundred yards of Shorty when that person turned ranch-ward.

"Huh! I must be popular," granted Bill. "I reckon I will stay in Clay Gulch till t'morrow mornin'; an' at the Victoria," he grinned. Then he laughed heartily. "Victoria! I got a better name for it than that, all right."

WHEN he pulled up before the Victoria and looked in the proprietor scowled at him, which made Bill frown as he went onto Hawley's. Putting his horse in the corral he carried his saddle and rifle into the barnroom and looked around. There was no one in sight, and he smiled. Putting the saddle and rifle back in one corner under the bar and covering them with gunny sacks he strolled to the Victoria and entered through the rear door. The proprietor reached for his gun but reconsidered in time and picked up a glass, which he polished with exaggerated care. There was something about the stranger that obtruded upon his peace of mind and confidence. He would let someone else try the stranger out.

Bill walked slowly forward, by force of will ironing out the humor in his face and assuming his sternest expression. "I want supper an' a bed, an' don't forget to be plumb polite," he rumbled, sitting down by the side of a small table in such a manner that it did not in the least interfere with the movement of his right hand. The observing proprietor observed and gave strict attention to the preparation of the meal. The gun-man arose and walked carelessly to a chair that had blank wall behind it, and from where he could watch windows and doors.

When the meal was placed before him he glanced up. "Go over there an' sit down," he ordered, motioning to a chair that stood close to the rifle that leaned against the wall. "Loaded?" he demanded. The proprietor could only nod. "Then sling it across yore knees an' keep still. Well, start movin'."

The proprietor walked as though he were in a

trance but when he seated himself and reached for the weapon a sudden flash of understanding illumined him and caused cold sweat to bead upon his wrinkled brow. He put the weapon down again, but the noise made Bill look up.

"Accost yore knees," growled the puncher, and the proprietor hastily obeyed, but when it touched his legs he let loose of it as though it were hot. He felt a great awe steal through his fear, for here was a gun-man such as he had read about. This man gave him all the best of it just to tempt him to make a break. The rifle had been in his hands, and while it was there the gun-man was calmly eating with both hands on the table and had not even looked up until the noise of the gun made him!

"My Gawd, 'e must be a wizard with 'em. I 'opes I don't forget!" With the thought came a great itching of his kneecaps; then his foot itched so as to make him squirm and wear horrible expressions. Bill, chancing to glance up carelessly, caught sight of the expressions and growled, whereupon they became angelic. Fearing that he could no longer hold in the laughter that tortured him, Bill arose.

"Shoulder, ARMS!" he ordered, crisply. The gun went up with trained precision. "Been a sojer," thought Bill. "Carry, ARMS! About, FACE! To a bedroom, MARCH!" He followed, holding his sides, and stopped before the room. "This th' best?" he demanded. "Well, it ain't good enough for me. About, FACE! Forward, MARCH! Column, LEFT! Ground, ARMS! Fall out." Tossing a coin on the floor as payment for the supper Bill turned sharply and went out without even a backward glance.

THE proprietor wiped the perspiration from his face and walked unsteadily to the bar, where he poured out a generous drink and gulped it down. Peering out of the door to see if the coast was clear, he scurried across the street and told his troubles to the harness-maker.

Bill leaned weakly against Hawley's and laughed until the tears rolled down his cheeks. Pushing weakly from the building he returned to the Victoria to play another joke on its proprietor. Finding it vacant he slipped upstairs and hunted for a room to suit him. The bed was the softest he had seen for a long time and it lured him into removing his boots and chaps and guns, after he had propped a chair against the door as a warning signal, and stretching out flat on his back, he prepared to enjoy

solid comfort. It was not yet dark, and as he was not sleepy he lay there thinking over the events of the past twenty-four hours, often laughing so hard as to shake the bed. What a reputation he would have in the morning! The softness of the bed got in its work and he fell asleep, for how long he did not know; but when he awakened it was dark and he heard voices coming up from below. They came from the room he had refused to take. One expression banished all thoughts of sleep from his mind and he listened intently. "Red-headed Irish gun-man! Why, they means me! 'Make him hop into h—l! I don't reckon I'd do that for anybody, even my friends!'"

"I tried to give 'im this room, but 'e wouldn't tyke it," protested the proprietor, hurriedly. "'E says the bloody room wasn't good enough for 'im, *Awad* 'e marches me out hand makes off. Likely 'e's in 'Awley's."

"No, he ain't," growled a strange voice. "You've gone an' bungled th' whole thing."

"But I s'y I didn't, you know. I tries to give 'im this werry room, George, but 'e would 'ave it. D'y think I wants 'im running haroud this blooming town? 'E's worse nor the other, *Awad* Gawd knows 'e was bad enough. 'E's a cold-blooded beggar, 'e is!"

"You missed yore chance," granted the other. "Wish I had that gun you had."

"I was wishing to Gawd you *did*," retorted the proprietor. "It never looked so bloody big before, d—n 'is 'ole!"

"Well, his cayuse is in Hawley's corral," said the first speaker. "If I ever finds Hawley kept him under cover I'll blow his head off. Come on; we'll get Harris first. He ought to be gettin' close to town if he got th' word I sent over to Tuxedo. He won't let us call him. He's a man of his word."

"He'll be here, all right. Fred an' Tom is watchin' his shack, an' we better take th' other end of town—there's no tellin' how be'll come in now," suggested Art Thomas. "But I wish I knowed where that cussed gun-man is."

As they went out, Bill, his chaps on and his boots in his hand, crept down the stairs, and stopped as he neared the hall door. The proprietor was coming back. The others were outside, going to their stations and did not hear the choking gasp that the proprietor made as a pair of strong hands reached out and throttled him. When he came to he was lying face down on a bed, gagged and bound

by a rope that cut into his flesh with every movement. Bill, waiting a moment, slipped into the darkness and was swallowed up. He was looking for Mr. Harris, and looking eagerly.

THE moon arose and bathed the dusty street and its crude shacks in silver, cunningly and charitably hiding its ugliness; and passed on as the skirmishing rays of the sun burst into the sky in close and eternal pursuit. As the dawn spread swiftly and long, thin shadows spring across the sandy street, there arose from the dissipated darkness close to the wall of a building an armed man, weary and slow from a tiresome vigil. Another emerged from behind a pile of boards that faced the marshal's abode, while down the street another crept over the edge of a dried-out water course and swore softly as he stood up slowly to flex away the stiffness of cramped limbs. Of vain speculation he was empty; he had exhausted all the whys and hows long before and now only muttered discontentedly as he reviewed the hours of fruitless waiting. And he was uneasy; it was not like Harris to take a dare and swallow his own threats without a struggle. He looked around apprehensively, shrugged his shoulders and stalked behind the shacks across from the two hotels.

Another figure crept from the protection of Hawley's corral like a slinking coyote, gun in hand and nervously alert. He was just in time to escape the challenge that would have been hurled at him by Hawley, himself, had that gentleman seen the skulker as he grouchy opened one shutter and scowled sleepily at the kindling eastern sky. Mr. Hawley was one of those who go to bed with regret and get up with remorse, and his temper was always easily disturbed before breakfast. The skulker, safe from the remorseful gentleman's eyes, and gun, kept close to the building as he walked and was again fortunate, for he had passed when Mr. Hawley strode heavily into his kitchen to curse the cold, rusty stove, a rite he faithfully performed each morning. Across the street George and Art Thomas walked to meet each other behind the row of shacks and stopped near the harness shop to hold a consultation. The subject was so interesting that for a few moments they were oblivious to all else.

A MAN softly stepped to the door of the Victoria and watched the two across the street with an expression on his face that showed his

smiling contempt for them and their kind. He was a small man, so far as physical measurements go, but he was lithe, sinewy and compact. On his opened vest, hanging slovenly and blinking in the growing light as if to prepare itself for the blinding glare of midday, glinted a five-pointed star of nickel, a lowly badge that every rural community knows and holds in an awe far above the metal or design. Swinging low on his hip gleamed the ivory butt of a silver-plated Colt, the one weakness that his vanity seized upon. But under the silver and its engraving, above and before the cracked and stained ivory handles, lay the power of a great force. Under the casing of that small body lay a virile manhood, strong in courage and determination. Toby Harris watched, smilingly; he loved the dramatic and found keen enjoyment in the situation. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a carelessly dressed cow-puncher slouching indolently along close to the buildings on the other side of the street with the misleading sluggishness of a panther. The red hair, kissed by the slanting rays of the sun where it showed beneath the soiled sombrero, seemed to be a flaming warning; the half-closed eyes, squinting under the brim of the big hat, missed nothing as they darted from point to point.

The marshal stepped silently to the porch and then onto the ground, his back to the rear of the hotel, waiting to be discovered. He had been in sight perhaps a minute. The cow-puncher made a sudden, eye-buffing movement and smoke whirled about his hips. Fred, turning the corner behind the marshal, dropped his gun with a scream of rage and pain and crashed against the window in sudden sickness, his gun-hand hanging by a tendon from his wrist. The marshal stepped quickly forward at the shot and for an instant gazed deeply into the eyes of the startled rustlers. Then his Colt leaped out and crashed a fraction of a second before the

brothers fired. George Thomas reeled, caught sight of the puncher and fired by instinct. Bill, leaving Harris to watch the other side of the street, was watching the rear corner of the Victoria and was unprepared for the shot. He crumpled and dropped and then the marshal, enraged, caded the rustler's earthy career in a stream of flame and smoke. Tom, turning into the street further down, wheeled and dashed for his horse, and Art, having leaped behind the harness shop, turned and fled for his life. He had nearly reached his horse and was going at top speed with great leaps when the prostrate man in the street, rising on his elbow, emptied his gun after him, the five shots sounding almost as one. Art Thomas arose convulsively and dove headlong under the horse he tried to gain. Harris looked hastily down the street and saw a cloud of dust racing northward, and granted, "Let him go—he won't never come back no more." Running to the cow-puncher he raised him after a hurried examination of the wounded thigh. "Hop along, Cassidy," he smiled in encouragement. "You'll be a better man with one good leg than th' whole gang was all put together."

The puncher smiled faintly as Hawley, running to them, helped him toward his hotel. "Th' bone is plumb smashed. I reckon I'll hop along through life. It'll be hop along, Cassidy, for me, all right. That's my name, all right. Huh! Hopalong Cassidy! But I didn't hop into it—I, did I, Harris?" he grinned bravely.

AND thus was born a nickname that found honor and fame in the cow-country—a name that stood for loyalty, courage and most amazing gun-play. I have Red's word for this, and the endorsement of those who knew him at the time. And from this on, up to the time he died, and after, we will know him and speak of him as Hopalong Cassidy, a cow-puncher.



THE DRIVE

by

CLARENCE E. MULFORD

THE STORY OF A FAMOUS CATTLE DRIVE WHICH WAS SAVED BY ONE MAN'S NERVE—THE NERVE OF HOPALONG CASSIDY

THE Norther was a thing of the past, but it left its mark on Buck Peters, whose grimness of face told what the winter had been to him. His daily rides over the range, the reports of his men since that deadly storm, had done a great deal to lift the sagging weight that rested on his shoulders; but he would not be sure until the round-up supplied facts and figures.

That the losses had not been greater he gave full credit to the valley with its arroyos, rock walls, draws, heavily grassed range and groves of timber; for the valley, checking the great southward drift by its steep ridges of rock, sheltered the herds in timber and arroyos and fed them on the rich profusion of its grasses, which, by some trick of the rushing winds, had been whirled clean of snow.

But over the cow-country, north, east, south and west, where vast ranges were unprotected against the whistling blasts from the north, the losses had been stupendous, appalling, stunning. Outfits had

been driven on and on before the furious winds, sleepy and apathetic, drifting steadily southward in the white, stinging shroud to a drowsy death. Whole herds, blindly moving before the wind, left their weaker units in constantly growing numbers to mark the trail, and at last lay down to a sleep eternal. And astonishing and incredible were the distances traveled by some of those herds.

Following the Norther came another menace and one which easily might surpass the worst efforts of the blizzard. Warm winds blew steadily, a hot sun glared down on the snow-covered plain and then came torrents of rain which continued for days, turning the range into a huge expanse of water and mud and swelling the water-courses with turgid floods that swirled and roared above their banks. Should this be quickly followed by cold, even the splendid valley would avail nothing. Ice, forming over the grasses, would prove as deadly as a pestilence; the cattle, already weakened by the

handships of the Norther, and not having the instinct to break through the glossy sheet and feed on the grass underneath, would search in vain for food, and starve to death. The week that followed the cessation of the rains started gray hairs on the foreman's head, but a warm, constant sun and warm winds dried off the water before the return of freezing weather. The herds were saved.

RELIEVED, Buck reviewed the situation. The previous summer had seen such great northern drives to the railroad shipping points in Kansas that prices fell until the cattlemen refused to sell. Rather than drive home again, the great herds were wintered on the Kansas ranges, ready to be hurled on the market when Spring came with better prices. Many ranches, mortgaged heavily to buy cattle, had been on the verge of bankruptcy, hoping feverishly for better prices the following year. Buck had taken advantage of the situation to stock his ranch at a cost far less than he had dared to dream. Then came the Norther and in the three weeks of devastating cold and high winds the Kansas ranges were swept clean of cattle, and even the ranges in the South were badly crippled. Knowing this, Buck also knew that the following Spring would show record high prices. If he had the cattle he could clean up a fortune for his ranch, and if his herd was the first big one to reach the railroad at Sandy Creek it would practically mean a bonus on every cow.

Under the long siege of uncertainty his impatience smashed through and possessed him as a fever and he finally ordered the calf round-up three weeks earlier than it had been held on the ranch. There was no need of urging his men to the task—they, like himself, sprang to the call like springs freed from a restraining weight, and the work went on in a fever of haste. And he took his place on the firing line and worked even harder than his outfit of fanatics.

One day shortly after the work began a stranger rode up to him and nodded cheerfully. "Li'l early, ain't you?" Buck grunted in reply and sent Skinny off at top speed to close a threatened gap in the driving line. "Goin' to git 'em on th' trail early this year?" persisted the stranger. Buck, swayed by some swift intuition, changed his reply. "Oh, I dunno; I'm mainly anxious to see just what that storm did. An' I hate th' calf burnin' so much I allus like to get it over quick." He shouted angrily at the cook and waved his arms frantically to

banish the chuck wagon. "He can make more trouble with that waggin than anybody I ever saw," he snorted. "Get out of there, you fool!" he yelled, dashing off to see his words obeyed. The cook, grinning cheerfully at his foreman's language and heat, forthwith chose a spot that was not destined to be the center of the cut-out herd. And when Buck again thought of the stranger he saw a black dot moving toward the eastern skyline.

THE crowded days rolled on, measured full from dawn to dark, each one of them a panting, straining, trying ordeal. Worn out, the horses were turned back into the temporary corral or to graze under the eyes of the horse wranglers, and fresh ones took up their work; and woe unto the wranglers if the supply fell below the demand. For the tired men there was no relief, only a shifting in the kind of work they did, and they drove themselves with grave determination, their iron wills overruling their aching bodies. First came the big herds in the valley; then, sweeping north, they combed the range to the northern line in one grand, mad fury of effort that lasted day after day until the tally man joyously threw away his chewed pencil and gladly surrendered the last sheet to the foreman. The first half of the game was over. Gone as if it were a nightmare was the confusion of noise and dust and cows that hid a remarkable certainty of method. But as if to prove it not a dream, four thousand cows were held in three herds on the great range, in charge of the extra men.

Back, leading the regular outfit from the north line and toward the bunkhouse, added the figures of the last tally sheet to the totals he had in a little book, and smiled with content. Behind him, cheerful as fools, their bodies racking with weariness, their faces drawn and gaunt, knowing that their labors were not half over, rode the outfit, exchanging chaff and banter in an effort to fool themselves into the delusion that they were fresh and "chipper." Nearing the bunkhouse they cheered lustily as they caught sight of the hectic cook laboring profanely with two balking pintos that had backed his wagon half over the edge of a barranca and then refused to pull it back again. Cooke's reply, though not a cheer, was loud and pregnant with feeling. To think that he had driven those two animals for the last two weeks from one end of the ranch to the other without a mishap, and then have them balance him and his wagon on the crumbling

edge of a twenty-foot drop when not half a mile from the bunkhouse, thus threatening the loss of the wagon and all it contained and the mangling of his sacred person! And to make it worse, here came a crowd of whooping idiots to feast upon his discomfiture.

The outfit, slowing so as not to frighten the devilish pintos and start them backing again, drew near; and suddenly the air became filled with darting ropes, one of which settled affectionately around Cooke's apoplectic neck. In no time the strangling, furious dough-king was beyond the menace of the crumbling bank, flat on his back in the wagon, where he had managed to throw himself to escape the whistling hoofs that quickly turned the dashboard into matchwood. When he managed to get the rope from his neck he arose, unsteady with rage, and choked as he tried to speak before the grinning and advising outfit. Before he could get command over his tongue the happy bunch wheeled and sped on its way, shrieking with mirth unholy. They had saved him from probable death, for Cooke was too obstinate to have jumped from the wagon; but they not only forfeited all right to thanks and gratitude, but deserved horrible deaths for the conversation they had so audibly carried on while they worked out the cook's problem. And their departing words and gestures made homicide justifiable and a duty. In this frame of mind Cooke watched them go.

BUCK, emerging from the bunkhouse in time to see the rescue, leaned against the door and laughed as he had not laughed for one heart-breaking winter. Drying his eyes on the back of his hand, he looked at the bouncing, happy crowd tearing southward with an energy of arms and legs and lungs that seemed a miracle after the strain of the round-up. Just then a strange voice made him wheel like a flash, and he saw Billy Williams sitting solemnly on his horse near the corner of the house.

"Hello, Williams," Buck granted, with no welcoming warmth in his voice. "What th' devil brings you up here?"

"I want a job," replied Billy. The two, while never enemies nor interested in any mutual disagreements, had never been friends. They never denied a nodding acquaintance, nor boasted of it. "That Norther shore raised h——I. There's ten men for every job, where I came from."

The foreman, with that quick decision that was his in his earlier days, replied crisply. "It's your'n. Fifty a month, to start."

"Keno. Lemme chuck my war-bag through that door an' I'm ready," smiled Billy. He believed he would like this man when he knew him better. "I thought th' Diamond Bar, over east a hundred mile, had weathered th' storm lucky. You got 'em beat. They're movin' heaven an' earth to get a herd on the trail, but they didn't have no job for *me*," he laughed, flushing slightly. "Sam Crawford owns it," he explained naively.

Buck laughed outright. "I reckon you didn't have much show with Sam, after that h'l trick you worked on him in Fenton. So Sam is in this country? How are they fixed?"

"They aims to shove three thousan' east right soon. It's fancy prices for th' first herd that gets to Sandy Creek," he offered. "I heard they're havin' lots of wet weather along th' Comanche; mebby Sam'll have trouble a-plenty gettin' his herd across. Cows is plumb aggravatin' when it comes to crossin' rivers," he grinned.

Buck nodded. "See that V openin' on th' skyline?" he asked, pointing westward. "Ride for it till you see th' herd. Help 'em with it. We'll pick it up t'morrow." He turned on his heel and entered the house, grave with a new worry. He had not known that there was a ranch where Billy had said the Diamond Bar was located; and a hundred miles handicap meant much in a race to Sandy Creek. Crawford was sure to drive as fast as he dared. He was glad that Billy had mentioned it, and the wet weather along the Comanche—Billy already had earned his first month's pay.

All that day and the next the consolidation of the three herds and the preparation for the drive went on. Sweeping up from the valley the two thousand three- and four-year-olds met and joined the thousand that waited between Little Timber and Three Rocks; and by nightfall the three herds were one by the addition of the thousand head from Big Coulee. Four thousand head of the best cattle on the ranch spent the night within gunshot of the bunkhouse and corals on Snake Creek.

Buck, returning from the big herd, smiled as he passed the chuck wagon and heard Cooke's snores, and went on growing serious all too quickly. At the bunkhouse he held a short consultation with his regular outfit and then returned to the herd again while his drive crew turned eagerly to their banks.

Breakfast was eaten by candle light and when the eastern sky faded into a silver gray Skinny Thompson vaulted into the saddle and loped eastward without a backward glance. The sounds of his going scarcely had died out before Hopalong, relieved of the responsibilities of trail boss, shouldered others as weighty and rode into the northeast with Lanky at his side. Behind him, under charge of Red, the herd started on its long and weary journey to Sandy Creek, every man of the outfit so imbued with the spirit of the race that even with its hundred miles advantage the Diamond Bar could not afford to waste an hour if it hoped to win.

OUT of the side of a verdant hill, whispering and purling, flowed a small stream and shyly sought the crystal depths of a rock-bound pool before gaining courage enough to flow gently over the smooth granite lip and scurry down the gentle slope of the arroyo. To one side of it towered a splinter of rock, slender and gray, washed clean by the recent rains. To the south of it lay a baffling streak a little lighter than the surrounding grass lands. It was, perhaps, a quarter of a mile wide and ended only at the horizon. This faint band was the Dunton trail, not used enough to show the strong characteristics of the depressed bands found in other parts of the cow-country. If followed it would lead one to Dunton's Ford on the Comanche, forty miles above West Bend, where the Diamond Bar aimed to cross the river.

The shadow of the pinnacle drew closer to its base and had crossed the pool when Skinny Thompson rode slowly up the near bank of the ravine, his eyes fixed smilingly on the splinter of rock. He let his mount nuzzle and play with the pool for a moment before stripping off the saddle and turning the animal loose to graze. Taking his rifle in the hope of seeing game, he went up to the top of the hill, glanced westward and then turned and gazed steadily into the northeast, sweeping slowly over an arc of thirty degrees. He stood so for several minutes and then granted with satisfaction and returned to the pool. He had caught sight of a black dot far away on the edge of the skyline that split into two parts and showed a sideways drift. Evidently his friends would be on time. Of the herd he had seen no sign, which was what he had expected.

When at last he heard hoof beats he arose lazily and stretched, chiding himself for falling asleep,

and met his friends as they turned into sight around the bend of the hill. "Reckoned you might 'a' got lost," he grinned sleepily.

"G'wan!" snorted Lanky.

"What'd you find?" eagerly demanded Hopalong.

"Three thousan' head on th' West Bend trail five days ahead of us," replied Skinny. "Oh! Sam is drivin' hard." He paused a moment. "Acts like he knows we're after him. Anyhow, I saw that feller that visited us on th' third day of th' round-up. So I reckon Sam knows."

Lanky grinned. "He won't drive so hard later. I'd like to see him when he sees th' Comanche! Bet it's a lake south of Dunton's, 'cordin' to what we found. But it ain't gon' to bother us a whole lot."

Hopalong nodded, dismounted and drew a crude map in the sand of the trail. Skinny watched it, grave and thoughtful until, all at once, he understood. His sudden burst of laughter startled his companions and they exchanged foolish grins. It appeared that from Dunton's Ford north, in a distance of forty miles, the Comanche was practically born. So many feeders, none of them formidable, poured into it that in that distance it attained the dignity of a river. Hopalong's plan was to drive off at a tangent running a little north from the regular trail and thus cross numerous small streams in preference to going on straight and facing the swollen Comanche at Dunton's Ford. As the regular trail turned northward when not far from Sandy Creek they were not losing time. Laughing gaily they mounted and started west for the herd which toiled toward them many miles away. Thanks to their scouting expedition the new trail was picked out and there would be no indecision on the drive.

EIGHTY miles to the south lay the fresh trail of the Diamond Bar herd, and five days' drive eastward on it, facing the water-covered lowlands at West Bend, Sam Crawford held his herd, certain that the river would fall rapidly in the next two days. It was the regular ford, and the best on the river. The water did fall, just enough to lure him to stay; but, having given orders at dark on the second night for an attempt at crossing at daylight the next morning, he was amazed when dawn showed him the river was back to its first level.

Sam was American born, but affected things

English and delighted in spelling "lahor" and like words with a "u." He hated hair chaps and maintained that the gun-play of the West was mythical and existed only in the minds of effete Easterners. Knowing that it was startling to hear him tell of Plummer, Hickock, Roberts, Thompson and a host of other gun-men who had splashed the West with blood. Not only did every man of that section pack a gun, but Crawford, himself, packed one, thus proving himself either a malicious liar or an imbecile. He acted as though the West belonged to him and that he was the arbiter of its destiny and its chosen historian—which made him troublesome on the great, free ranges. Only that his pretensions and his crabbed, irascible, childish temper made him ludicrous he might have been taken seriously, to his sorrow. Failing miserably at law, he fled from such a precarious livelihood, heshet with a haunting fear that he had lost his grip, to an inherited ranch. This fear that pursued him turned him into a cowering cringe of those who excelled him in most things, except in fits of lying about the West as it existed at that time.

When he found that the river was over the lowlands again he became furious and, carried away by rage, shouted down the wiser counsel of his clear-headed night boss and ordered the herd into the water. Here and there, desperate, wild-eyed steers wheeled and dashed back through the cordon of riders, their numbers constantly growing as the panic spread. The cattle in the front ranks, forced into the swirling stream by the pressure from the rear, swam with the current and clambered out below, adding to the confusion. Steers fought throughout the press and suddenly, out of the right wing of the herd, a dozen crazed animals dashed out in a bunch for the safety of the higher ground; and after them came the herd, an irresistible avalanche of maddened beef. It was not before dark that they were rounded up into a nervous, panicky herd once more. The next morning they were started north along the river, to try again at Dunton's Ford, which they reached in three days, and where another attempt at crossing the river proved in vain.

MEANWHILE the Bar-20 herd pushed on steadily with no confusion. It crossed the West Run one noon and the upper waters of the Little Comanche just before dark on the same day. Next came East Run, Pawnee Creek and Ten Mile

Creek, none of them larger than the stream the cattle were accustomed to back on the ranch. Another day's drive brought them to the west branch of the Comanche itself, the largest of all the rivers they would meet. Here they were handled cautiously and "nudged" across with such ease that a day was spent in the work. The following afternoon the east branch held them up until the next day and then, with a clear trail they were sent along on the last part of the long journey.

When Sam Crawford, forced to keep on driving north along the Little Comanche, saw that wide, fresh trail, he barely escaped apoplexy and added the finishing touches to the sullenness of his outfit. Seeing the herd across, he gave orders for top speed and drove as he never had driven before; and when the last river had been left behind he left the night boss in charge of the cattle and rode on ahead to locate his rivals of the drive. Three days later, when he returned to his herd, he was in a towering fury and talked constantly of his rights and an appeal to law, and so nagged his men that mufity stalked in his shadow.

When the Bar-20 herd was passing to the south of the little village of Depou, Hopalong turned back along the trail to find the Diamond Bar herd. So hard had Sam pushed on that he was only two days' drive behind Red and his outfit when Hopalong rode smilingly into the Diamond Bar camp. He was talking pleasantly of shop to some of the Diamond Bar punchers when Sam dashed up and began upbraiding him and threatening dire punishment. Hopalong, maintaining a grave countenance, took the lacing meekly and humbly as he winked at the grinning punchers. Finally, after exasperating Sam to a point but one degree removed from explosion, he bowed cynically, said "so-long" to the cheerful outfit and loped away toward his friends. Sam, choking with rage, berated his punchers for not having thrown out the insulting visitor and commanded more speed, which was impossible. Reporting to Red the proximity of their rivals, Hopalong fell in line and helped drive the herd a little faster. The cattle were in such condition from the easy traveling of the last week that they could easily stand the pace if Crawford's herd could. So the race went on, Red keeping the same distance ahead day after day.

Then came the night when Sandy Creek lay but two days' drive away. A storm had threatened since morning and the first lightning of the drive was

seen. The cattle were mildly restless when Hopalong rode in at midnight and he was cheerfully optimistic. He was also very much awake, and after trying in vain to get to sleep he finally arose and rode back along the trail toward the stragglers, which Jimmy and Lanky were holding a mile away. Red had pushed on to the last minute of daylight and Lanky had decided to hold the stragglers instead of driving them up to the main herd so they would start even with it the following morning. It was made up of the cattle that had found the drive too much for them and was smaller than the outfit had hoped for.

HOPALONG had just begun to look around for the herd when it passed him with sudden uproar. Shouting to a horseman who rode furiously past, he swung around and raced after him, desperately anxious to get in front of the stampede to try to check it before it struck the main herd and made the disaster complete. For the next hour he was in a riot of maddened cattle and shaved death many times by the breadth of a hand. He could hear Jimmy and Lanky shouting in the black void, now close and now far away. Then the turmoil gradually ceased and the remnant of the herd paused, undecided whether to stop or go on. He flung himself at it and by driving cleverly managed to start a number of cows to milling, which soon had the rest following suit. The stampede was over. A cursing riot emerged from the darkness and hailed. It was Lanky, coldly ferocious. He had not heard Jimmy for a long time and feared that the boy might be lying out on the black plain, trampled into a shapeless mass of flesh. One stumble in front of the charging herd would have been sufficient.

Daylight disclosed the missing Jimmy hobbling toward the breakfast fire at the cook wagon. He was bruised and bleeding and covered with dirt, his clothes ripped and covered with mud; and every bone and muscle in his body was alive with pain.

The Diamond Bar's second squad had ridden in to breakfast when a horseman was seen approaching at a leisurely lope. Sam, cursing hotly, instinctively fumbled at the gun he wore at his thigh in defiance to his belief concerning the wearing of guns. He blinked anxiously as the puncher stopped at the wagon and smiled a heavy-eyed salutation. The night boss emerged from the shelter of the wagon and grinned a sheepish welcome. "Well, Cassidy, you fellers got th' trail

somehow. We was some surprised when we hit yore trail. How you makin' it?"

"All right, up to last night," replied Hopalong, shaking hands with the night boss. "Got a match, Barnes?" he asked, holding up an unlighted cigarette. They talked of things connected with the drive and Hopalong cautiously swung the conversation around to mishaps, mentioning several catastrophes of past years. After telling of a certain stampede he had once seen, he turned to Barnes and asked a blunt question. "What would you do to anybody as stampeded yore stragglers within a mile of th' main herd on a stormy night?" The answer was throaty and rumbling. "Why, shoot him, I reckon." The others intruded their ideas and Crawford squirmed, his hand seeking his gun under the pretense of tightening his belt.

HOPALONG arose and went to his horse, where a large bundle of canvas was strapped behind the saddle. He loosened it and unrolled it on the ground. "Ever see this afore, boys?" he asked, stepping back. Barnes leaped to his feet with an exclamation of surprise and stared at the canvas. "Where'd you get it?" he demanded. "That's our old wagon cover!"

Hopalong, ignoring Crawford, looked around the little group and smiled grimly. "Well, last night our stragglers was stampeded. Lanky told me he saw somethin' gray blow past him in th' darkness, an' then th' herd started. We managed to turn it from th' trail an' so it didn't set off our main herd. Jimmy was near killed—well, you know what it is to ride afore stampeded cows. I found this cover blowed agin' a h'll clump of trees, an' when I sees yore mark, I reckoned I ought to bring it back." He dug into his pocket and brought out a heavy clasp knife. "I just happened to see this not far from where th' herd started from, so I reckoned I'd return it, too." He held it out to Barnes, who took it with an oath and wheeled like a flash to face his employer.

Crawford was hacking toward the wagon, his hand resting on the butt of his gun, and a whiteness of face told of the fear that gripped him. "I'll take my time, right now," growled Barnes. "D——d if I works another day for a low-lived coyote that'd do a thing like that!" The punchers behind him joined in and demanded their wages. Hopalong, still smiling, waved his hand and spoke. "Don't leave him with all these cows on his hands, out here on

the range. If you quits him, wait till you get to Sandy Creek. He ain't no man, he ain't; he's a nasty lil' brat of a kid that couldn't never grow up into a man. So, that bein' true, he ain't goin' to get handled like a man. I'm goin' to lick him, 'stead of shootin' him like he was a man. You know," he smiled, glancing around the little circle, "us cow-punchers don't never carry guns. We don't swear, nor wear chaps, even if all of us has got 'em on right now. We say 'please' an' 'thank you' an' never get mad. Not never wearin' a gun I can't shoot him; but, by G—d, I can lick him th' worst he's ever been licked, an' I'm goin' to do it right now." He wheeled to start after the still-backing cow-man, and leaped sideways as a cloud of smoke swirled around his hips. Crawford screamed with fear and pain as his Colt tore loose from his fingers and dropped near the wheel of the wagon. Terror gripped him and made him incapable of flight. Who was this man, what was he, when he could draw and fire with such speed and remarkable accuracy? Crawford's gun had been half raised before the other had seen it. And before his legs could perform one of their most cherished functions the limping cow-puncher was on him, doing his best to make good his promise. The other half of the Diamond Bar drive crew, attracted by the commotion at the chuck wagon, rode in with ready guns, saw their friends making no attempt at interference, asked a few terse questions and, putting up their guns, forthwith joined the circle of interested and pleased spectators to root with them for the limping redhead.

RED, back at the Bar-20 wagon, inquired of Cookie the whereabouts of Hopalong. Cookie, still smarting under Jimmy's galling fire of language, granted ignorance and a wish. Ned looked at him, scowling. "You can talk to th' kid like that, mehby; but you get a civil tongue in yore head when any of us grown-ups ask questions." He

turned on his heel, looked scarchingly around the plain and mounting, returned to the herd, perplexed and vexed. As he left the camp, Jimmy hobbled around the wagon and stared after him. "Kid!" he snorted. "Grown-ups!" he sneered. "Huh!" He turned and regarded Cookie evilly. "Yo're gonna get a good lickin' when I get so I can move better," he promised. Cookie lifted the red flannel dish-rag out of the pan and regarded it thoughtfully. "You better wait," he agreed pleasantly. "You can't run now. I'm homin' for to drape this mop all over yore wall-eyed face; but I can wait." He sighed and went back to work. "Wish Red would shove you in with th' rest of th' cripples back yonder, an' get you off'n my frazzled nerves."

Jimmy shook his head sorrowfully and limped around the wagon again, where he resumed his sun bath. He dozed off and was surprised to be called for dinner. As he arose, grunting and growling, he chanced to look westward, and his shout apprised his friends of the return of the missing redhead.

Hopalong dismounted at the wagon and grinned cheerfully, despite the suspicious marks on his face. Giving an account of events as they occurred at the Diamond Bar chuck wagon, he wound up with: "Needn't push on so hard, Red. Crawford's herd is due to stay right where it is an' graze peaceful for a week. I heard Barnes give th' order before I left. How's things been out here while I was away?"

Red glared at him, ready to tell his opinion of reckless fools that went up against a gun-packing outfit alone when his friends had never been known to refuse to back up one of their outfit. The words hang on his lips as he waited for a chance to launch them. But when that chance came he had been disarmed by the cheerfulness of his happy friend "Hoppy," he said, trying to be severe, "yo're nothin' but a crazy, d—d fool. But what did they say when you started for buffy Sam like that?"



Don't Frame a Red Head

By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

FARO-BANK is an expensive game when luck turns a cold shoulder on my player, and "going broke" is as easy as ruffling a deck. When a man finds he has two dollars left out of more than two months' pay and that it has taken him less than thirty minutes to get down to that mark, he cannot be censured much if he rails at that Will-o'-the-wisp, the Goddess of Luck. Put him a good ten days' ride from home, acquaintances and money, and perhaps he will be justified in adding heat in plenty to his denunciation. He had played to win when he should have coppered, coppered when he should have played to win, he had backed both ends against the middle and played the high card as well—but only when his bets were small did the turn show him what he wanted to see. Perhaps the case-keeper had hoodwinked him, for he never did have any luck at cards when a tow-headed man had a finger in the game.

Fuming impotently at his helplessness, a man humped across the main street in Coffey, constrained and a little awkward in his new store clothes and new, squeaking boots that were clumsy with stiffness. The only things on him that could be regarded as old and tried friends were the battered sombrero and the heavy walnut-handled Colt's .45 which rubbed comfortably with each movement of his thigh. The weapon, to be sure, had a ready cash value—but he could not afford to part with it. The horse belonged to his ranch, and the saddle must not be sold, to part with it would be to lose his mark of caste and become a walking man, which all good punchers despised.

"Ten days from home, knowin' nobody, two mensly dollars in my pocket, an' luck dead agin me," he growled with pugnacious pessimism. "Oh, I'm a wise old bird, I am! A h—l of a wise bird Red smut an' cute an' shirty, a cache of wisdom, a real, bonified Smart Aleck with a head full of spavined brains. I copper th' deuce an' th' deuce wine, I play th' King to win for ten dollars when I ought to copper it. I lay two-bits and it comes night—ten dollars an' I see my guess go loco. Reckon I better slip these here twin backs down in my kill-me-soon boots afore some blind papoose takes 'em away from me. Wiser'n Solomon, I am, I've got old Caesar climbin' a cactus for pleasure an' joy. S-u-c-k-e-r as my middle name—an' I'm busted."

He almost stumbled over a little tray of a three-legged table on the corner of the street and his face went hard as he saw the layout. Three halves of English walnut shells lay on the faded and soiled green cloth and a blackened, starveling pea was still rolling from the shaking he had given the table. He stopped and regarded it gravely, jangling his two dollars disconsolately. "Don't this town do nuthin' else besides gamble?" he muttered, looking around.

"Howdy, stranger?" cheerfully cried a man who hastened up. "Want to see me fool you?"

The puncher's anger was aroused to a thum, licking flame, but it passed swiftly and a cold calculating look came into his eyes. He glanced around swiftly, trying to locate the cappers, but they were not to be seen, which worried him a little. He always liked to have possible danger

where he could keep an eye on it. Perhaps they were eating or drinking—the thought stirred him again to anger: two dollars would not feed him very long, nor quench his thirst.

"Pick it out, stranger," invited the proprietor, idly shifting the shells. "It's easy if yo're right smart—but lots of folks just can't do it, they can't seem to get th' hang of it, somehow. That's why it's a bettin' proposition. Here it is, right before yore eyes! One little pea, three little shells, right here plumb in front of yore eyes! Th' little pea hides under one of th' little shells, right in plain sight. But can you tell which one? That's th' whole game, right there. See how it's done?" and the three little shells moved swiftly but clumsily and the little pea disappeared. "Now, then, where would you say it was?" demanded the hopeful operator, generally.

The puncher gripped his two dollars firmly, shifted his weight as much as possible on his sound leg, and scowled: he knew where it was. "Do I look like a kid? Do you reckon you have to coax like a fool to get me all primed up to show how remarkably smart an' quick I am? You don't, I know how smart I am. Say, you ain't, not by my kinda miracle, a blind papoose, are you?" he demanded.

"WHAT you mean?" asked the other, smiling as he waited for the joke. It did not come, so he continued: "Don't take no harm in my fool wind-jummin', stranger. It's in th' game. It's a habit; I've said it so much I just can't help it no more—I up an' says it at a funeral once; that is, part of it—th' first part. That's dead right! But I reckon I'm wastin' my time—unless you happen to feel colish an' hain't got nothin' to do for an age. I've been playin' in hard luck th' last week or so—you see, I ain't no good as Iuster be. I ain't quite so quick, an' a little bit off my quickness is a whole lot off my chances. But th' game's square—an' that's a good deal more'n you can say about most of 'em."

The puncher hesitated, a grin flickering about his thin lips and a calm joy warming him comfortably. He knew the operator. He knew that face, the peculiar crescent-shaped scar over one brow, and the big, blue eyes that years of life had not entirely robbed of their baby-like innocence. The past, sorted thoroughly and quickly by his memory, showed out that face before a crowd of others. Five years is not a long time to remember

something unpleasant, he had reasons to remember that constance. Knowing the face he also knew that the man had been, at one time, far from "square." The associations and means of livelihood during the past five years, judging from the man's present occupation, had not been the kind to correct any evil tendency. He had a forefinger on the edge of the tray, "Stret th' machinery—I'll risk a couple of dollars, anyhow. That ain't much to lose. I bet two dollars I can call it right," he said, watching closely.

He won, as he knew he would; and the result told him that the gambler had not reformed. The dexterous fingers shifting the shells were slower than others he had seen operate and when he had won again he stopped, as if to leave. "When I hit town a short time ago I didn't know I'd be so lucky. I went an' drewed two months' pay when I left th' ranch. I shore don't need it. Shuffle 'em again—it's yore money, anyhow," he laughed. "You should 'a' quit th' game before you got so slow."

"Gom' back to work purty soon?" queried the shell-man, wondering how much this "sucker" had left unspent.

"Not me! I've only just had a couple of drinks since I hit town—an' I'm due to celebrate."

The other's face gave no hint of his thoughts, which were that the fool before him had about a hundred dollars on his person. "Well, luck's with you today—you've called it right twice. I'll bet you a cool hundred that you can't call it th' third time. It's th' quickness of my hands agin yore eyes—an' you can't beat me three straight. Make it a hundred? I hate to play all day."

"I'll lay you my waistin's an' have some more of yore money," replied the puncher, feverishly. "Ain't scared, are you?"

"Don't know what it means to be scared," laughed the other. "But I ain't got no small change, nothin' but tens. Play a hundred an' let's have some real excitement."

"Nope, right or nothin'."

He won again. "Now, sixteen even. Come on, I've got you beat."

"But what's th' use of stringin' 'long like that?" demanded the shell-man.

"Gimme a chance to get my hand in, wou'd you?" retorted the puncher.

"Well, all right," replied the gambler, and he lost the sixteen.

"Now thirty," suggested the puncher. "Next time all I've got, every red cent. Once more to practice—then every red," he repeated, shifting his feet nervously. "I'll clean you out an' have a real genuine blow-out on yore money. Come on, I'm in a hurry."

"I'll fool you *this* time, by th' Lord!" swore the gambler, angrily. "You've got more luck than sense. An' I'll fool you next time, too. You're quicker'n most men I've run up agin, but I can beat you, shore as shootin'. Th' game's square, th' play fair—my hand agin yore eye. Ready? Then watch me!"

He swore loudly and shoved the money across the board to the winner, bewailing his slowness and getting angrier every moment. "You're th' cussedest man I ever bet agin! But I'll get you *this* time. You can't guess right all th' time, an' I know it."

"There she is, sixty-two bucks, three score an' two sunbeams; all I've got, every cent. Let's see you take it away from me!"

The gambler frowned and choked back a curse. He had risked sixty dollars to win two, and the fact that he had to let this fool play again with the fire hurt his pride. He had no fear for his money—he knew he could win at every throw—but to play that long for two dollars! And suppose the sucker had quit with the sixty!

"Do you get a dollar a month?" he demanded, sarcastically. "Well, I reckon you can't, at that. Thought you had money, thought you drew down two months' pay an' hasn't had nothin' more'n two drunks? Did you go an' lose it on th' way?"

"Oh, I drew it a month ago," replied the sucker, surprised. "I've only had two drunks in this town, which I hit 'bout an hour ago. But I shore lost a wad playin' furo-bank agin a tow-head. Come on—lemme take sixty more of yore money, anyhow."

"Sixty-two?" snapped the proprietor, determined to have those two miserable dollars and break the sucker for revenge. "Every cent, you remember."

"All right, I don't care! I ain't no tin-horn," grumbled the other. "Thank I care 'bout two dollars?" But he appeared to be very nervous, nevertheless.

"Well, put it on th' table."

"After you put youm down."

"THERE it is. Now watch me close!" A gleam of joy flashed up in the angry man's eyes as he played with the shells. "Watch me close! Mebbey

it is, an' mebbey it ain't—th' game's square, th' play's fair. It's my hand agin yore eye. Watch me close!"

"Oh, go ahead! I'm watchin', all right. Think I'd go to sleep now?"

The shuffling hands stopped, the shells lay quiet, and the gambler gazed blankly down the unsympathetic barrel of a Colt.

"Now, Thomas, old fumble-figger," calmly remarked the supposed sucker as he cautiously slid the money off the table to be picked up later when conditions would be more favorable. "Th' little pea ain't under no shell. Stop! Step back one pace an' elevate them paws. Don't make no more funny motions with that hand, savvy? But you can drop th' pea if it hurts them two fingers. Now we'll see if I win, I alius like to be shore," and he cautiously turned over the shells, revealing nothing but the dirty green cloth. "I win, it ain't there—just like I thought."

"Who are you, an' how'd you know my name?" demanded the gambler, mentally cursing his two missing coppers. They were drinking once too often and things were going to happen in their vicinity, and very soon.

"Why, you took twenty-five dollars from me up in Alameda once, when I couldn't afford to lose it," grinned the puncher. "I was something of a lad then. I remember you, all right. My fireman told me about yore bang-up fight agin th' Johnson brothers, who gave you that scar. I thought then that you were a great man—now I know you ain't. I wouldn't 'a' played at all if I hadn't knowed how crooked you was. Take yore layout an' yore crookedness, find th' pea an' yore coppers, an' clear out. An' if anybody asks you if you've seen Hopalong Cassidy, you tell 'em I'm up here in Colby makin' some easy money beatin' crooked games. So-long, an' don't look back!"

Hopalong watched him go and then went to the nearest place where he could get something to eat. In due time, having disposed of a square meal, Hopalong called for a drink and a cigar, and sat quietly smoking for nearly half an hour, so lost in thought that his cigar went out repeatedly. As he reviewed his disastrous play at furo many small details came to him and now he found them interesting. The dealer was not a master at his trade and Hopalong had seen many better, in fact the man was not even second class, and this fact hurt his pride. He had played a careful game, and the

great majority of his small bets had won—it was only when he risked twenty or thirty dollars that he lost. The only big bet that he had been at all lucky on was one where doubles showed on the turn and he had been split, losing half of his stake. But when he had played his last fifty dollars on the Jack, open, the first blow fell and he had left the table in disgust.

Why weren't there cue-cards, so the players could keep their own tally of the cards instead of having to depend on the cue-box kept by the case-keeper? This made him suspicious, a crooked dealer and case-keeper can turn a big bet at will, unless the players keep their own cases or are exceptionally wise; and even then a really good dealer will get away with his play nine times out of ten. While he seldom played a system, he had backed one that morning, but he was cured of that weakness now. If the game were squares he figured he could get at least an even break, if crooked, nothing but a gun could beat it, and he had a very good gun. When he thought of the gun, he reviewed the arrangement of the room and estimated the weight of the rough, deal table on which rested the flop layout. He smiled and turned to the bartender, "Hey, barkeeper! Got any paper an' a pencil?"

After some rummaging the incriminating dispenser of liquid forget-it produced the articles in question and Hopalong, drawing some harned lines, paid his bill, treated, kept the pencil and headed for the fire game across the street.

WHEN he entered the room the table was deserted and he nodded to the dealer as he seated himself at the right of the case-keeper, who now took his place, and opposite the dealer and the lookout. He was not surprised to find no other players in the room, for the hour was wrong, later in the afternoon there would be many and at night the place would be crowded. This suited him perfectly and he settled himself to begin playing.

When the deck was shuffled and placed in the deal box Hopalong put his ruled paper in front of him on the table, talked once against the King for the soda card and started to play quarters and half-dollars. He caught the furtive look that passed between the men as they saw his cue-card but he gave no sign of having observed it. After that he never looked up from the cards while his bets were small. Two deals did not alter his money much and

he knew that so far the game was straight. If it were not to remain straight the crookedness would not come more than once in a deal if the frame-up was "single-odd" and then not until the bet was large enough to practically break him. His high-card play ran in his favor and kept him gradually drawing ahead. He lost twice in calling the last turn and guessed it right once, at four to one, which made him win in that department of the game.

When the fifth deal began he was quite a little ahead and his play became bolder, some of the bets going as high as ten dollars. He broke even and then played heavier on the following deal. His first high bet, twenty dollars, was on the eight, open, only one eight having shown. Double eights showed on the next turn and he was split, losing half the stake.

It was about this time that the lookout discovered that Mr. Cassidy was getting a little excited and several times had nearly forgotten to keep his cases. This information was cautiously passed to the dealer and case-keeper and from them on they evinced a little more interest in the game. Finally, the player, after studying his cue-card, placed fifty dollars on the Queen, open, and copped the deuce, a case-card, and then put ten more on the high card. This came in the middle of the game and he was prepared for trouble as the turn was made, but fortune was kind to him and he raked in sixty dollars. He was mildly surprised that he had won, but explained it to himself by thinking that the stakes were not yet high enough. From then on he was keenly alert, for the crookedness would come soon if it ever did, but he strung small sums on the next dozen turns and waited for a new deal before plunging.

As the dealer shuffled the cards the door opened and closed noisily and a surprised and doubting voice exclaimed "Ain't you Hopalong, Cassidy? Cassidy, of th' Bar-20?"

Hopalong glanced up swiftly and back to the cards again. "Yes, what of it?"

"Oh, nothin'. I saw you com' an' I wondered if I was right."

"Ain't got time now, see you later, mebby. You might stick around outside so I can borrow some money if I go broke." The man who knew Mr. Cassidy silently faded, but did not stick around, thereby proving that the player knew human nature and also how to get rid of a pest.

When the dealer heard the name he glanced

krenly at the owner of it, exchanged significant looks with the case-keeper and filtered for an instant as he shoved the cards together. He was not sure that he had shuffled them right, and an anxious look came into his eyes as he realized that the deal must go on. It was far from reassuring to set out to cheat a man so well known for expert short-gun work as the Bar-20 puncher and he wished he could be relieved. There was no other dealer around at that time of the day and he had to go through with it. He did not dare to shuffle again and chance losing the card beyond hope, and for the reason that the player was watching him like a hawk.

A ten lay face up on the deck and Hopalong, tallying against it on his sheet, began to play small sums. Luck was variable and remained so until the first twenty dollar bet, when he reached out excitedly and raked in his winnings, his coat sleeve at the same time brushing the cue-card off the table. But he had forgotten all about the tally sheet in his eagerness to win and played several more cards before he noticed it was missing, and sought for it. Smothering a curse he glanced at the case-keeper's tally and went on with the play. He did not see the look of relief that showed momentarily on the faces of the dealer and his associates, but he guessed it.

HE had no use for cue-cards when he felt like doing without them; he liked to see them in use by the players because it showed the game to be more or less straight, and it also saved him from overhauling his memory. When he had brushed his tally sheet off the table he knew what he was doing, and he knew every card that had been drawn out of the box. So far he had seen no signs of cheating and he wished to give the dealer a chance. There should now remain in the deal box three cards, a deuce, five and a four, with a Queen in sight as the last winner. He knew this to be true because he had given all his attention to memorizing the cards as they showed in the deal box, and had made his bets small so he would not have to bother about them. As he had lost three times on a four he now believed it was due to win.

Taking all his money he placed it on the four: "Two hundred and seventy on th' four to win," he remarked, crisply.

The dealer shuffled almost inaudibly and the case-keeper prepared to cover him on the cue-rack under cover of the excitement of the turn. If the four lay under the Queen, Cassidy lost, if not he

either won or was in hock. The dealer was unusually grave as he grasped the deal box to make the turn and as the Queen slid off a five-spot showed.

The dealer's hand trembled as he slid the five off, showing a four, and a winner for Hopalong. He went white—he had bungled the shuffle in his indecision and now he didn't know what might develop. And in his agitation he exposed the hock card before he realized what he was doing, and showed another five. He had made the mistake of showing the "odd."

Hopalong, ready for trouble, was more prepared than the others and he was well underway before they started. His left hand swung hard against the case-keeper's jaw, his Colt roared at the drawing bartender, crumpling the trouble-hunter into a heap on the floor dazed from shock of a ball that "crossed" his head. He had done this as he sprang to his feet and his left hand, dropping swiftly to the heavy table, threw it over onto the lockout and the dealer at the instant their hands found their guns. Caught off their balance they went down under it and before they could move sufficiently to do any damage, Hopalong vaulted the table and locked their guns out of their hands. When they realized just what had happened a still-smoking Colt covered them. Many of Hopalong's most successful and spectacular plays had been less carefully thought out beforehand than this one and he laughed sneeringly as he looked at the men who had been so greedy as to try to clean him out the second time.

"Get up!" he snarled.

They crawled out of their trap and meekly obeyed his hand, backing against the wall. The case-keeper was still unconscious and Hopalong, disarming him, dragged him to the wall with the others.

"I wondered where that deuce had crawled to," Mr. Cassidy remarked, grimly, "an' I was goin' to see, only it's plain now. I knowed you was chummy, but my G—d! Any man as can't deal 'single-odd' ought to quit th' business, or play straight. So you had five fives agin me, eh? Instead of keepin' th' five under th' Queen, you bungled th' deuce in its place. When you went to pull off th' Queen an' five like they was one card, you had th' deuce under her. You see, I keep cases in my old red head an' I didn't have to believe what the cue-rack was all fixed to show me. An' I was wittin', all ready for

th' play that'd make me lose

"As long as this deal was framed up, we'll say it was this mornin'. You cough up th' hundred an' ten I lost then, an' another hundred an' ten that I'd won if it wasn't crooked. An' don't forget that two-seventy I just pulled down, neither. Make it in double eagles an' don't be slow 'bout it. Money or lead—with you callin' th' turn." It was not a very large amount and it took only a moment to count it out. The eleven double eagles representing the morning's play seemed to slide from the dealer's hand with reluctance—but a man lives only once,

and they slid without stopping.

The winner, taking the money, picked up the last money he had bet and, distributing it over his person to equalize the weight, gathered up the guns from the floor. Backing toward the door he noticed that the bartender moved and a keen glance at that unfortunate assured him that he would live.

When he reached the door he stopped a moment to ask a question, the tenseness of his expression relaxing into a broad, apologetic grin. "Would you mind tellin' me where I can find some more frame-ups? I shore can use the money."